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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM  
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD  
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL  
PARIS ALSO FOR POL  
ROME FOR MFO  
E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: IS\_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT  
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

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SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:  
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- 11. Mideast
- 12. Syrian-Lebanese Track

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Key stories in the media:  
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All media reported that five Israeli soldiers were killed and six others were wounded in the Gaza Strip Sunday when a booby-trapped tunnel blew up under an IDF outpost near Rafah. The attackers also launched mortar shells and fired at the outpost. The soldiers, who were all from the Bedouin reconnaissance battalion, killed an armed Palestinian who participated in the assault. Hamas and a Fatah faction, the Fatah Hawks, claimed joint responsibility for the attack. Israel Radio reported that last night the IAF bombarded targets in the Gaza Strip, including weapons-manufacturing workshops. During the weekend, the media reported that four Israeli civilians were injured Friday by Palestinian mortar fire directed against Neve Dekalim in the Gaza Strip. Ha'aretz reported that the IDF response to the attack resulted in the death of a 7-year-old Palestinian girl in Khan Yunis. The media reported on various other incidents in the territories.

U/S of Defense Douglas Feith was quoted as saying in an interview published by Jerusalem Post on Sunday that the U.S. hopes that Iran will follow Libya's lead in abandoning its nuclear program, but that nobody should rule out the possibility of military action against Tehran's nuclear sites if it does not.

Leading media reported that Sunday, jailed Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouti withdrew his candidacy for chairmanship of the PA. On Sunday, Yediot reported that a first group of European monitors arrived Friday in the PA ahead of the elections.

The media reported on progress in Likud-Shas coalition talks. Leading media quoted Shas negotiators as saying Sunday that the Likud negotiating team promised them that anti-religious legislation initiated during the Shinui era would not move forward, particularly the legitimization of common-law couples. On Sunday, Yediot reported that in the next government, Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres is expected to be in charge of the development of the Gaza Strip after the Israeli withdrawal, as well as of the Galilee and the Negev.

Jerusalem Post reported that Sunday, during a visit to Kuwait, PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) apologized for Yasser Arafat's support of the 1990 invasion of Kuwait. On Sunday, Jerusalem Post reported that Arafat's economic adviser, Muhammad Rashid, has agreed to hand over to the PA some USD 600 million believed to be held in secret bank accounts.

Yediot reported that the cabinet Sunday unanimously endorsed PM Sharon's proposal that hundreds of Palestinian prisoners be released, as a gesture toward Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. One hundred to 200 prisoners will be freed in total. Leading media reported that Trade, Industry and Employment Minister Ehud Olmert will sign a free trade agreement with Egypt Tuesday in Cairo. Yediot reported that Sharon's choice for the next ambassador in Cairo is Likud Knesset Member Majalli Whbee, a Druze.

Over the weekend, leading media reported that Secretary of State Colin Powell told a gathering of Islamic

leaders in Rabat, Morocco, on Saturday that the Middle Eastern countries must carry out political and economic reforms to ease the "despair and frustration" that affects much of the region. Citing AP, Jerusalem Post quoted Powell as saying en route to Rabat on Friday night that reform in the Islamic world should not be impeded by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yediot reported that the Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee intends to drastically reduce, or even cancel, penalties that will be imposed on settlers resisting evacuation.

Yediot and Maariv reported that Sharon told the cabinet Sunday that the press plays a negative role in its "sickly fervor" to publish information about alleged immorality among IDF troops.

All media cited the Shin Bet as saying Sunday that security forces have arrested four Israeli citizens from East Jerusalem on suspicion that they were involved in September 2003's bombing of the Hillel Cafe in Jerusalem that left seven people dead.

On Sunday, Jerusalem Post quoted O/C Israel Navy Adm. David Ben-Bashat as saying that Israel will purchase two more Dolphin-class submarines from Germany, and that the contract will be signed this coming spring.

During the weekend, leading media reported that retired U.S. generals have presented President Bush with a plan to invade Iran.

On Sunday, Yediot reported that eight Israeli consultants left for Iraq several days ago to participate in the reconstruction of the infrastructure in the country. The newspaper says that the mission is coordinated with the Iraqi government.

Ha'aretz reported that veteran personality and journalist Rafi Ginat is expected to be named editor-in-chief of Yediot, replacing current editor Moshe Vardi.

On Sunday, Maariv printed a White House picture representing President Bush attending the lighting of Chanukah candles at the White House last Thursday. The newspaper quoted Bush as saying at the ceremony: "In every generation, these lights have warmed the hearts of those not yet free."

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**1. Mideast:**  
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Summary:  
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Military correspondent Alex Fishman wrote on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "Already, more than a year ago, we learned that terrorist groups in Gaza were moving on from primitive terrorist activity to guerrilla activity inspired by Hizbullah.... But somebody on our side missed the target by a mile."

Security and intelligence affairs commentator Amit Cohen wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "These people [the extremist Palestinian groups] can do to Abu Mazen what Israel did to Arafat: make him into an irrelevant leader."

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "Ariel Sharon received the legitimization he needs from the President of Egypt, and there is no one, at least not in the coming week, to challenge that in the Arab states."

Political commentator Shalom Yerushalmi wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "Sharon has now returned home. With the Likud he can buttress a much more serious political status ahead of the disengagement. This is bad news for the settlers."

Zuheir Andrawus, Editor-in-Chief of the Israeli-Arab newspaper Kul Al-Arab, wrote in Ha'aretz: "[Marwan] Barghouti is the authentic representative of the Palestinian people, which has known a lot of suffering."

Efraim Inbar, Director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, wrote in conservative, independent Jerusalem Post: "More vigorous American peace-making in the Arab-Israeli arena would not only divert energy from the push for reform in the Arab world; it also has the potential for increasing tensions between Jerusalem and Washington."

Block Quotes:

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**I. "Under the Nose of the IDF"**

Military correspondent Alex Fishman wrote on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist *Yediot Aharonot* (December 13): "It is intolerable for guerrilla activity on this scale and of this quality to develop under our nose for so many months, completely undetected. Guerrilla activity, as we learned in Lebanon, is more sophisticated than the terrorism that we have known in the Gaza Strip, but it is also more exposed, because it requires more organization and resources. Already, more than a year ago, we learned that terrorist groups in Gaza were moving on from primitive terrorist activity to guerrilla activity inspired by Hizbullah, which also supplied the know-how. This called for a different form of offensive and intelligence activity on the part of the IDF. But somebody on our side missed the target by a mile.... Now the army will have to tailor a military operation appropriate to the spirit of the times: it will be painful enough to deter Hamas, but it will also take account of Israel's relations with Egypt, of the international observers who will be arriving in the region and also of the rise in Abu Mazen's popularity in the polls."

**II. "Clear Signal to Abu Mazen"**

Security and intelligence affairs commentator Amit Cohen wrote in popular, pluralist *Maariv* (December 13): "If for a moment it seemed that Abu Mazen was succeeding in taking control of the Palestinian imbroglio, at least until the coming elections, the terror attack last night reminded us how fragile that illusion was.... Publicly, the Palestinian leadership in the making will find it hard to condemn the operation. As long as the IDF continues to operate in Gaza, the Palestinians view the area as a legitimate killing field. But behind closed doors, there is a great deal of anger about the double game being played by Hamas. 'Certainly Abu Mazen is angry when he hears about things like this,' said a Palestinian security source. 'But what can we do? The understandings we reached with Hamas spoke only about terror attacks inside Israeli territory'.... This is the second signal that Abu Mazen received from Fatah elements in Gaza. The first was several days after Arafat's death, when shots were fired at Abu Mazen and Dahlan. This time as well, the centers of power within the Gaza Strip are trying to signal that their ability to influence does not stop at the ballot box next January. These people can do to Abu Mazen what Israel did to Arafat: make him into an irrelevant leader."

**III. "The Arabs Are Coming! The Arabs Are Coming!"**

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in independent, left-leaning *Ha'aretz* (December 12): "The great wonder has already occurred, even before half a tile has been removed from the roof of a house in the Gush Katif settlement bloc or before even one settlement outpost (remember that issue?) has folded: Ariel Sharon received the legitimization he needs from the President of Egypt, and there is no one, at least not in the coming week, to challenge that in the Arab states, especially when even Syrian President Bashar Assad is ready to talk to Sharon and Yasser Arafat is no longer in the picture. Sharon grabbed the reins of the diplomatic process with the object of steering it not when he declared the disengagement plan but when he proved that he is ready to take great risks to implement it. Egypt understood very quickly that this is the only wagon on which any sort of process can be moved ahead; as such, it opened the periodic window of opportunity of the peace process, while an array of hitchhikers wait by the roadside. Now the Arab states, too, are waiting to see whether the democratic process in Israel -- in the form of the activists of the Likud Central Committee -- doesn't tip over at the first sharp turn."

**IV. "Sharon Has Come Home"**

Political commentator Shalom Yerushalmi wrote in popular, pluralist *Maariv* (December 13): "[Until recently,] the Prime Minister was perceived as someone who had lost his political base. But Sharon came to his senses at the eleventh hour. Today he has an anchor. Members of the [Likud] Central Committee are behind him, even if many of them hate the disengagement plan.... Sharon has now returned home. With the Likud he can buttress a much more serious political status ahead of the disengagement. This is bad news for the settlers and the leaders of the Council of Jewish

Settlements in the Territories, who have effectively led the Likud in the past few months; they will now have to find new channels for their activity. Perhaps they will focus on broad popular opposition activity -- something in which they excel."

#### IV. "Run Barghouti, Run"

Zuheir Andrawus, Editor-in-Chief of the Israeli-Arab newspaper *Kul Al-Arab*, wrote in *Ha'aretz* (December 12): "[Marwan] Barghouti is the authentic representative of the Palestinian people, which has known a lot of suffering.... To many members of Palestinian society, he is a freedom fighter who has paid a hefty price. Thus, the people won't betray him and would vote for him, be it only in defiance of the old leadership, which has to leave. Barghouti symbolizes all those Palestinians who have paid a heavy price for the liberation of their people from the burden of Israeli occupation -- and he hasn't made a fortune. Therefore, run, Barghouti, and don't give up."

VI. "Reading the Egyptian Sphinx"

Efraim Inbar, Director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, wrote in conservative, independent *Jerusalem Post* (December 12): "More vigorous American peace-making in the Arab-Israeli arena would not only divert energy from the push for reform in the Arab world; it also has the potential for increasing tensions between Jerusalem and Washington. Egypt well understands that the Bush vision of a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is closer to its own vision than to Sharon's prescription. A renewal of Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace talks might therefore put stress on Israel's relationship with Washington. Weakening Israel is not inimical to Egyptian interests. What should Israel's response be? While Egypt obviously has its own agenda, Israel should welcome any improvement in bilateral relations. However, Jerusalem must demand that Cairo live up to its 1979 peace treaty commitments."

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#### 12. Syrian-Lebanese Track:

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##### Summary:

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Uri Savir, chief Israeli negotiator with Syria from November 1995 to March 1996, wrote in conservative, independent *Jerusalem Post*: "Israel should ... accept the Syrian offer for negotiations without preconditions."

##### Block Quotes:

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#### "Say Yes to Syria"

Uri Savir, chief Israeli negotiator with Syria from November 1995 to March 1996, wrote in conservative, independent *Jerusalem Post* (December 12): "Our region is too fragile for a step-by-step approach, as each step may potentially be sabotaged by the opponents of stability, democratization and peace. Accordingly, the Bush administration could encourage a quantum leap in the region by suggesting guiding principles for negotiations on all fronts, with an emphasis on regional cooperation, which is part of the Bush vision. Israel should adhere to such a strategy and, in this context, accept the Syrian offer for negotiations without preconditions.... It seems that in most of our negotiations about this region, we know the end result -- more or less. However, we don't know how to begin.... There seems to be little doubt about the changing currents in Syria, yet many believe that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon cannot wage a peace offensive on Gaza and Syria simultaneously. Israel has, in the past, won wars on many fronts. In the future it should attempt to make peace on all these fronts. The Middle East has moved in recent months from despair to hope. It is in Israel's best interest not to miss this window of opportunity."

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